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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a list of signs, symptoms, and indicators of emotionally sensitive adolescents includes clinging behavior, withdrawn behavior, shy/inhibited behavior, represses anger, poor reaction to criticism, makes self-disparaging statements, low self-esteem, "can't forgive self or others," ruined by a small critical comment, exploding when criticized, emotionally volatile, and depression. Causes reviewed include dysfunctional families, divorce, unrealistic expectations, abuse or neglect, and parenting "enmeshment." Gifted children often seem to be more emotionally sensitive than other children. Teaching, parenting, and counseling issues that must be examined as possible contributors to the problem include standards, especially inordinately high standards; past reinforcement history, and the vagaries of parenting response due to divorce. The emotionally sensitive adolescent has many concerns including teachers' expectations, comparison to siblings, feelings of inferiority, inadequacy or rejection, divorce, moving, and bullies. Parental guidelines are presented; music and art therapy are recommended. Prognosis is discussed. (EMK)

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The Emotionally Sensitive Adolescent

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emotionally sensitive adolescent. It reviews causes and indicators and examines the teaching, parenting and counseling issues relevant to this adolescent. Examining the past reinforcement history of the emotionally sensitive adolescent is reviewed as a critical, crucial domain to understanding this problem.

The emotionally sensitive adolescent is a teenager that presents with a constellation of problems, indicators and symptoms which causes much concern to parents, teachers, counselors and therapists. This paper will discuss the indicators, review signs and symptoms and examine the past reinforcement history of the adolescent as a way of understanding this adolescent.

The emotionally sensitive adolescent, manifests some, but not all of the following signs, symptoms and indicators:

a) clinging behavior- staying near a favored teacher
b) withdrawn behavior- staying away from all teachers and peers
c) shy/inhibited- staying away from peers or all classmates as well as same aged peers
d) represses-often does not express anger when appropriate or other emotions when reasonable
e) Does not react well to criticism-Time and again, this is a major concern cited by teachers and coaches. The adolescent cannot tolerate any type of negative feedback or constructive criticism. If criticized, the adolescent may not return to school or may be upset for the rest of the day.
f) Makes self disparaging statement- puts oneself down and makes negative comments about themselves (particularly when criticized)
g) Low self esteem/low self worth- The student does not think well of themselves and this becomes apparent during specific testing (projective testing; self concept testing)
h) Can't forgive self or others- the student cannot allow a mistake to go unpunished. They self criticize or if a teacher does criticize, the student puts up a wall or a front and refuses to interact with that teacher any further.
i) Ruined by a small critical comment- Some students if they make a mistake early in the day have difficulty recovering or regrouping and getting on with the rest of the day. If a student is criticized early in the day, the rest of the day is spent in a depressive mood.
j) Exploding, some emotionally sensitive adolescents will literally " go ballistic " when criticized, and again act in an inordinate manner
k) Emotionally Volatile- some adolescents expect to be criticized and explode emotionally when approached by teachers or coaches or parents. There may not have been any intended criticism, but the child reacts " as if " it is anticipated
l) Depression- Some adolescents remain in a depressed mood following the criticism-whether it is warranted or not.

Causes:

Some emotionally sensitives come from dysfunctional families. Others are children from families with an alcoholic background. In today's age of multiple Divorces, some children have had several parents or stepparents.

In intact families, some parents place unrealistic expectations on their children.

Still other emotionally sensitives come from families where there has been emotional abuse or neglect- be it physical, sexual or emotional.

In terms of the family unit, some emotionally sensitives come from parents where there is enmeshment in the family unit or a trend toward "parenting" where children are expected to take on the roles of parents and cook, clean, do the laundry and assume many of the chores that parents normally do. This differs from the "take out the garbage type of chore" that all children should have as a member of the family. The chores are multiple, and unrealistic and leave no time for the child to "be a child" or in this case a typical "adolescent".

For some reason, gifted children seem to be more emotionally sensitive than others- They may think too much and may have an inordinate desire to please parents and teachers. Their approval and recognition needs may be greater than average and they may be having difficulty getting their social and emotional needs met. Since they have been doing so well for so long, they may have some difficulty dealing with criticism from a critical teacher.

Standards

It is imperative to examine standards, in order to understand the "emotionally sensitives". For some, their standards are self-imposed. They have a certain set standard which may be "good enough". For others, the parents may set the standard which may be inordinate or unreasonably high.

Some children may have teachers which have very high standards which they are unable to meet (or which they feel they are unable to meet). In some areas, a coach may have very high expectations-for a high schooler to break the 4 minute mile or for a team to go undefeated. Some adolescents can cope with expectations for a class or for a team, but not for individually inordinate expectations.

Past History of Reinforcement

Infants become children and children become adolescents and they bring with them a history of reinforcement. This differs in terms of both quality of reinforcement and quantity of reinforcement. Again, in this age of divorce, some children may have had only one parent to praise, acknolwedge and recognize their efforts and accomplishments.

Some may have only been given brief cursory regard. Teachers too, in this age of mainstreaming and inclusion may not have time to really, truly honestly praise effort and the work of their students. So some students try honestly in their endeavors and get little in return. Many students are simply ignored as they go through the educational system. Other students are ignored by their parents and receive little recognition and acknowledgement from their peers. As such, they are less well prepared to deal with criticism or negative comments when they do come their way.

Reinforcement must be seen in terms of both quantity and quality and density of reinforcement.

Concerns of the Emotionally Sensitive Adolescent

The emotionally sensitive student has many, many concerns. Some teachers are simply overly demanding of some students. Some teachers are martinets and overdo the " classroom management and control " issue.

Many students feel unjustly compared with their siblings and others. An older brother or sister who may have been a sports star or scholar is a difficult act for some children to follow.

Some children believe that they are inferior and inadequate - perhaps in certain specific areas. For example, there are many undiagnosed learning disabled children who may be attempting to cope with school in the very best way that they can. At some point, however, they reach a point of diminishing returns and their learning disability (it may be in spelling or writing or math) becomes apparent. They are then highly sensitive to criticism.

Other children have lost parents through death, divorce or other mechanisms. The issue of loss and grief is a difficult one for many to work through. The loss of a pet, a boyfriend/girl friend or a grandparent may be equally devastating. A peer who has overdosed or committed suicide is equally problematic.

Rejection, like loss can affect the psychic apparatus of the adolescent. Failure to make the team, to have a date on Saturday night or a failure in a specific subject with a specific teacher can cause emotional pain and result in hightened sensitivity.

Divorce, a dirty word in any context is more problematic here. Many adolescents blame themselves. In some instances, divorce has been brought on by the delinquency or the hyperactivity of an adolescent. Counseling here is obviously quite difficult.

Moving from one school or town to another is highly emotionally wrenching. Any significant change in one's environment such as a friend moving away, a teacher leaving (or even dying during a semester) or a coach changing jobs can be devastating.

A school bully can also be the culprit. Some students always seem to be picked on- the result can be an emotionally sensitive withdrawn child.

What to do?

In general, teachers, parents, counselors and others always jump at the " What can or should we do?" question.
Apparently, we are all equally ready to intervene and to " fix " this child. We feel that first and foremost understanding is critical and crucial. We must enter the child's existential world and understand their past history in a comprehensive fashion. Music therapy is one source of understanding, case work and art therapy are other avenues.

In general, certain guidelines are salient. First, patience is a virtue and should be practiced. Parents, teachers and counselors must recognize and realize that this has a history which must be understood. We must all start with and praise the good. In general, a diplomatic, global, cordial congenial approach must be initiated. Global statements rather than specific one are needed initially.

Time, is needed to establish rapport and to allow the child or adolescent to know that he or she will not be criticized for their behavior. Gentleness, kindness and validation is imperative. Let's face it- no one likes to be criticized and you can call it constructive or destructive, it is still criticism and it is tough to be criticized. Teachers too, often use red pens and respond inordinately.

Parents should get professional help if needed or necessary. In specific, they should be very aware of comparative statements. (E.g. " when I was a child "Or" your brother Bob never had trouble in trigonometry). Parents should try to schedule quality time- adolescents need it and deserve it and it does make for fond memories.

Parents must make an effort to recognize the adolescents specific skills, talents and abilities and how being emotionally sensitive can be a positive factor in one's life. Parents must also allow for privacy and boundaries. Too often, parent pry and probe into the adolescent's life. Adolescents often cringe internally, but say little. Reading should be encouraged, but not forced. Biographies and hobbies are especially useful.

Parents must communicate about the emotionally sensitive child; parents can share what apparently the " raw nerves " are in the child's life.

It is difficult to continually get negative feedback from teachers and coaches, and yet we don't prepare children in how to handle noxious feedback and how to cope with criticism. Active listening is also an important skill for parents to employ.

Clinicians may find that projective testing yields a good deal of information about the patterns, themes and overriding emotional concerns of the emotionally sensitive adolescent. Lehtonen and Shaughnessy (1994) have utilized projective drawings such as the draw a person, and the draw a family to discern important clinical information relative to clients and to assess therapeutic progress.

Shaughnessy and Lehtonen (1993) have also offered specific suggestions as to how to cope with adolescents who may be talented, yet overly sensitive and who may not be aware of the skills and abilities that they do possess.

Music Therapy

Music therapy is one avenue for emotionally sensitive adolescents. Music can be one way in which adolescents can express themselves, and do so very well. Lehtonen has suggested that music therapy is an effective therapeutic tool if used properly.

Prognosis

The prognosis for the emotionally sensitive adolescent is good with support. The parents, teachers and counselor must see the strengths that this individual possesses. He or she may make a very good nurse or veterinarian who is sensitive to the pain of others. Counselors may want to employ a positive connotation to the emotional sensitivity. In other words, indicate , or have the adolescent indicate the positive things about being sensitive emotionally. Clinically, at least the adolescent is not anhedonic.

The adolescent may also have creative skills, talents, and abilities that have not as yet been discovered. They may also have some interpersonal skills that have not as yet been tapped or perceived. If possible, a mentor should be procured for this adolescent.

On the negative side, sometimes things do become worse. In this scenario, the adolescent may begin to experience somatic complaints and problems. A thirteen year old child with an ulcer or a 14 year old child with high blood pressure or splitting headaches is approaching a condition known as " alexithymia " whereas while these adolescents do not appear to experience emotions, they do express them via somatic or bodily complaints. Psychiatric intervention is thus warranted in this regard.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has cursorily reviewed the " emotionally sensitive " adolescent. It has described the symptoms and reviewed some concerns relative to this specific group. Parents, teachers and conselors have concerns relative to this group and some management issues are addressed.

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